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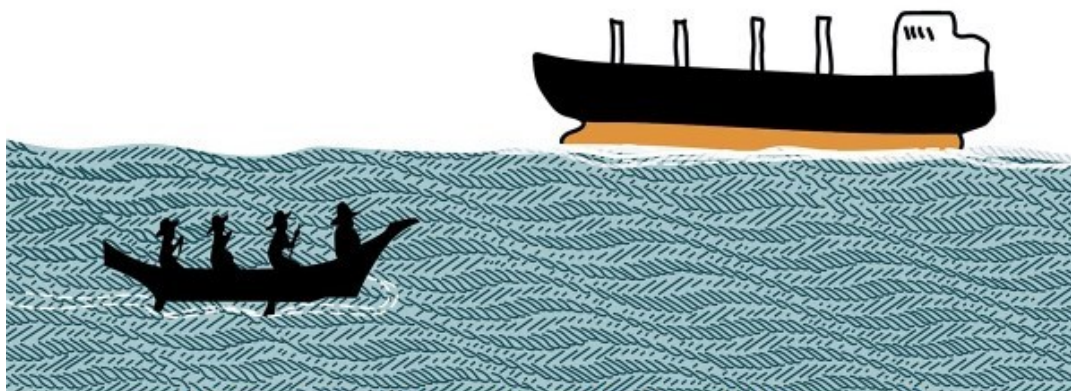
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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global



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Shepherds and Shawls: Making Place in the Western Himalayas

Jennifer Hoover

In research, as in the mountains, the route from A to B is rarely a straight line, even when someone points the way and tells you “seedhe jaao!” (Go straight!). So even though I titled this paper “Shepherds and Shawls,” it’s actually going to go in reverse order. Although the shawls were my entry point into this work, my encounters with shepherds ultimately led in other directions. The shawl of the title is the Kullu Shawl,¹ which in Craftsvilla’s map of handloom products² represents the state of Himachal Pradesh in India where I spent 10 months researching wool production. This map happened to come across my Facebook feed the day after I arrived at my host institution. I almost reposted it, with some note like “greetings from the middle of Kullu Shawls!” But although I was in the middle of Himachal, I wasn’t in an area where that particular shawl is woven or typically worn—although they were for sale in tourist shops in the larger towns. It occurred to me that the Craftsvilla map, as beautiful as it is, expresses the very assumptions that I was hoping to counter in my research, as it presents textile practices as timeless traditions and actually obscures diversity across both space and time.

Although an explicit goal of the Craftsvilla graphic is to depict diversity, the format of the map inherently obscures diversity across both space and time. By choosing a single handloom product to represent each state, the map renders other textile traditions within and crossing state boundaries invisible. For example, in Himachal there are other types of shawls, such as black-and-white checked *garadi* commonly woven and worn by men in Kangra where I conducted most of my research.

The format of the handloom map also freezes the textiles presented within political boundaries—state and national—as they happen to be drawn at a particular time and by particular political actors. Some of these borders, especially in the Himalayan and trans-Himalayan regions, are contested. Despite the inclusion of some historical context within the state descriptions, the map overall presents its textiles within the ethnographic present, as static traditions.

My research instead explores material and making through dynamic collaborations with wool workers. What brought me to Himachal were questions around the types of wool that go into a Kullu shawl—noted on the Craftsvilla page as “Merino, Angora, and Local sheep wool.”³ I had spent some time in Kullu Valley before, learning from a shawl weaver. I knew that she, and other weavers, typically work with yarns that are milled in Ludhiana, an industrial textile production center in the plains, from wool that is mostly imported. In the shops, the only knitting yarns available are acrylic and nylon. I wanted to know what was the story with the local wool, and what’s the potential for getting it into the local textile production systems. But something else interesting is happening in this simple list of wool types, and it ended up becoming the focus of

¹ For details of the design and history of the Kullu shawl, see Suzette R. Copley Patterson, “Weaving Traditions Along the ‘Wool Road’ in India,” *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings* (2002). <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/537>

² Craftsvilla, “Fabric Tour of India: Discover India’s Amazing Handloom Heritage.” January 24, 2017, <http://www.craftsvilla.com/blog/indian-handlooms-from-different-states-of-india/>

³ Ibid.

my research—the term “local” is included alongside breeds of fiber animals, implying that “local” is not merely a geographic designation, and in fact has something to do with breed.

Most industry discourse and interventions center on breeding for “improved” wool. This is certainly true in Himachal as well. In the 1970s the government began importing fine-wool sheep like merino for a crossbreeding program,⁴ and current and former officials informed me that at this point there are no pure native breed sheep left. But it turns out that when you hang out with shepherds for a while, they’ll start to point out sheep that they identify as “desi,”—native or local—in contrast to other sheep which they variously identify as “cross,” “merini,” or “Australia.” I don’t have space to go into the complexities of breed here, but I do want to note that in using the term “desi” I am not making any claims about the breeding histories or genetics of these sheep. Rather, I use it to attend to certain characteristics of the wool and the sheep which are valued within local networks of use and exchange and which I’ll argue express some aspects of place in particularly interesting ways.



“desi” and “cross” type sheep before shearing

So, what are those characteristics? The one I’ll be focusing on here is double-coatedness—the presence of two distinct types of fiber within the fleece of a single sheep—one long, relatively

⁴ For a summary of government breeding objectives, see the All India Coordinated Project on Sheep Breeding Final Report, (Avikinagar, Rajasthan, Central Sheep & Wool Research Institute, 1993), 2.

coarse and low-crimp, and one that is shorter, finer, and crimpier. Commodity wool production is geared primarily toward attaining as much uniformity within the material as possible, and double-coated wool is anything but uniform. But it does have some useful properties, for example felting really well into a thick, weather-proof fabric. I'll come back to that thought, but first I want to take a little theoretical detour through the material.

I find wool useful in thinking about place because wool is quite directly a manifestation of place: sheep eat the grasses and other plants of the landscape, and metabolize it into wool.⁵ So wool embodies place; but equally, I would argue that wool embodies time. As each strand of wool grows out from the sheep's skin, it becomes in effect a record of the sheep's experiences in the time between shearings—in most production systems worldwide once a year, but in Himachal typically every 6 months or even 3 times a year, with one long and two short growing seasons.

Wool also expresses time differentially—it doesn't always grow at the same rate. Factors like nutrition and daylength can affect the speed of growth, and different breeds of sheep are more or less sensitive to those changes. And, in the case of double-coated wool, there are 2 timescales expressed side-by-side within the same fleece. This has some practical implications, for example in devising a wool sampling protocol that will yield scientifically rigorous results. But what I'm really interested in is a theoretical exploration of this wool, this double-coated desi wool, as a materialization of the polyrhythms of agro-pastoral life in Himachal.

Rebecca Brown develops a polyrhythmic theory of time in analyzing visual records of colonial-era Indian craft production, proposing a time “that returns but not always to repeat;... that takes on patterns from a range of sources and brings them together into a moving, action-filled, layered polyrhythmic temporality.”⁶ Brown's polyrhythmic time calls in temporal terms for attention the same concerns expressed spatially in the Deep Local and contact zones invoked in the theme of this symposium.

I began thinking about the rhythms of Himachali life while learning Pahari folk songs. A common rhythm in these songs pairs long and short pulses in combinations of 2s and 3s. This rhythm put me in mind of the agricultural cycles of the main subsistence crops in the region—rice and wheat, which are planted in the same fields in succession but not in exactly 6-month intervals—it's a little syncopated. That basic rhythm is overlaid with the rhythms of other crops and seasons—tea, tourism, and of course wool and migratory herding. Herding itself encompasses multiple rhythms of movement across the landscape—some herders migrate for 3 months, others for 6 months, some for the whole year, stopping at home for only a month or so twice a year.

Brown situates the paintings that she analyzes within the temporalities of the craft actions depicted and the circulation of the paintings as collectors purchased and displayed them.⁷ Temporalities of wool production could include the timescales of wool growth; of washing, carding, spinning, and weaving wool; of circulation of finished items through time-bound rituals

⁵ For a more in-depth consideration of relationships between wool and place, see Jennifer Hoover and Susan B. Kaiser, “Classing California's Wool: From Local to Global Networks,” in *Global Perspectives on Sustainable Fashion*, ed. by Alison Gwilt, Alice Payne, and Evelise Anicet Rüttschilling (New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019), 61-70.

⁶ Rebecca M. Brown, “Colonial Polyrythm: Imaging Action in the Early 19th Century,” *Visual Anthropology* 26 (2013): 270.

⁷ Ibid.

of gifting within communities and through sales to tourists who visit seasonally; and of lifespans of use and repair. Movements within these phases echo each other: the movements of sheep crossing the parallel mountain chains in the back-and-forth of seasonal migration, of the spinner's hand winding yarn onto the charkha and drafting the roving back, of the weaver's shuttle passing the weft back and forth across parallel warp ends, and of the finished cloth in shawl or blanket or jacket form, once again moving along the herding routes, no longer on the bodies of the sheep, but on the bodies of the herders.



spinning, plying, and weaving wool



shearing sheep on top of a woolen blanket

If desi wool is a material expression of these polyrhythms of Pahari life, then the crossbreeding program could be read as part of a project to impose the monorhythm of industrial time onto rural mountain communities. One government official even suggested to me that herders should move to a once-yearly shearing, which would work fine for the “improved” sheep, but would result in unusably long desi wool.

I'll conclude with an anecdote that offers some suggestions of how theoretical attention to polyrhythms can play out in practice, and can inform craft interventions seeking to strengthen local economies. I mentioned before that one property of double-coated wool is its ability to felt. Herding communities make use of this property through *mandai*, by which woven cloth and bundles of spun yarn are transformed into thick, weather-proof fabric and sturdy cord. These in turn are stitched into blankets and garments which herders rely on for survival as they move through rugged terrain in harsh and variable weather conditions. When members of a village self-help group asked me to come work with them, I considered how to adapt these rugged textiles that communities make for their own use into something more marketable to non-herding consumers. I thought, “let's make felt!”, which would be similar to existing practices but would reduce the amount of time and labor going into the finished products.

It would be easy to frame the work I did with this group as a skills training, but I prefer to think of it as a collaboration in Anna Tsing's formulation as “transformation through encounter.”⁸ Like polyrhythms, collaborations bring together elements from various sources in ever-shifting and not necessarily pre-determined patterns. “Training,” on the other hand, exists within progressive, linear time: before the training, participants do not possess a skill, and after the training, they do. Training also places me, a white, economically privileged foreigner, in a position of authority over the rural women attending the training, who are positioned as lacking in some way. So I

⁸ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 28.

resist the “training” frame. Which is good, because as a training, the project was not especially successful—I happened to arrive for the follow-up session when women were busy getting the wheat harvested between unusually early pre-monsoon rains, so few could take time to work with me. And we found out that the nearby carding mill only operates seasonally, so we couldn’t get our fleeces carded there. But, as a collaborative encounter, the work was enormously productive.

While a few of us worked, what seemed like half the village passed by and stopped to see what we were doing. Some commented on the proceedings, sharing their own knowledge of *mandai* and of uses of wool which had fallen out of practice with the introduction of cheap manufactured goods such as plastic flip-flops and foam camping pads. Many villagers expressed interest in learning to felt, mostly to make slippers and seat cushions for their own use. The process mixed “traditional” and “modern” materials and practices in decidedly non-linear ways—for example we used broken flip-flops as molds for felting wool slippers, which prompted one participant to create a model of a type of shoe that used to be commonly made out of bits of wool cloth.



flip-flop felting mold and felted wool slippers

I also learned that felting and *mandai* are less similar than I had presumed—the motions are the same, but the bodily experience of performing them is quite different. In felting, you have to start gently to keep the fibers from shifting out of place before they begin to cohere. In *mandai*, women apply a lot of force right away, using their feet and their whole body weight. To demonstrate felting, I started by working the material with my hands, which for me is less forceful than using my feet. But my collaborators would really lay into it. I came to see the motions of felting as akin not only to *mandai*, but to other tasks within the polyrhythms of women’s domestic and agricultural work: the daily kneading of dough for chapatti, weekly washing of laundry, and annual processing of tea leaves—all of which involve application of considerable force. Practicing these skills myself taught me more about life in that place, but also taught me more about felting.

*mandai**processing tea leaves*

One feature of Tsing's collaborative encounters is that they are indeterminate—their outcomes are not defined in advance, nor is it easy to delineate their boundaries. So it's difficult to decide when, or even if, this felting encounter ended. After a week of playing with wool, I accompanied one of the village leaders to a meeting of the Ghumantu Pashupalak Mahasabha, an activist group of herders from multiple ethnic, caste, and religious communities across the state. The felt pieces that we brought to display catalyzed conversation with many of the herders, including some questioning of my intentions as a researcher. Those conversations led to invitations to other villages to do felting, and the collaborations that formed through mutual encounters with wool continue to unfold.

The polyrhythms in which I immersed myself while making place with my Pahari friends also pulse through the writing of this re-presentation of place for an audience on the opposite side of the globe. Many of the ideas that form the bulk of this paper coalesced, quite suddenly, after I'd been working on it for a while without making much headway. It was a bit like making felt, feeling it suddenly go from a mess of strands going every which way, to a single mass—still an unruly tangle, but starting to cohere. So, as I thank the Himachali herders and weavers who welcomed me into their Deep Local, I also thank the Textile Society of America and the pan-global audience of this paper for joining in my ongoing encounters with shepherds, shawls, and the wool that links them together.

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